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FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6619

INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

RUEHAD/AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI IMMEDIATE 0383

RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO IMMEDIATE 0179

RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS IMMEDIATE 0260

RUEHKU/AMEMBASSY KUWAIT IMMEDIATE 0353

RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH IMMEDIATE 0215

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE

RUEKJCS/CJCS WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE

RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL IMMEDIATE

RUEPGAB/MNF-I C2X BAGHDAD IZ IMMEDIATE

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 001022

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/01/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER MOPS IR IZ SA

SUBJECT: NSA RUBAIE BLAMES IRAN FOR BASRAH CONFRONTATION;
SEES OPPORTUNITIES TO DEEPEN CRACKS IN SADRIST MOVEMENT

Classified By: POL-MIL MINISTER-COUNSELOR MARCIE B. RIES, REASONS 1.4(B)
) AND (D)

1.(S) SUMMARY: In an April 1 meeting with POL-MIL Minister Counselor Ries and NSC Iraq and Afghanistan Senior Director McGurk, Iraqi National Security Advisor Rubaie claimed to have evidence that Iran had fed PM Maliki false reports of Sadrists atrocities in Basrah, leading Maliki to launch a hasty and inadequately planned security operation into the city. The Iranians had then brokered a GOI-Sadr ceasefire, demonstrating their range of influence. Rubaie said that Maliki would face tough questioning from other political leaders as to what the Basrah operation had achieved, and would need to be resolute in portraying the operation as having successfully achieved its goals. He maintained the Iraqi public increasingly understands the degree to which Iran (in particular, via the IRGC) is supporting JAM Special Groups to pursue an Iranian agenda, and saw opportunities both to fragment the Sadrists movement and to moderate Sadr's bellicosity and anti-Americanism. Rubaie agreed the Basrah operation had underscored the need to move ahead with a Strategic Framework, and reiterated his view that the Saudi government was sincere in seeking to rebuild ties with Iraq.
END SUMMARY.

2.(S) In an April 1 meeting, POL-MIL Minister Counselor Ries, visiting NSC Senior Director Brett McGurk, and Iraqi National Security Advisor Mowafiq Rubaie discussed lessons learned and next steps on the GOI's confrontation with Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) as well as next steps toward the Strategic Framework.
Key points:

3.(S) IRAN MANIPULATING BOTH SIDES? Rubaie described the planning leading up to the assault on Basrah. In February, Maliki supported a plan conceived by Basrah ISF commander General Mohan - and thoroughly discussed with MNF-I - to spend several months laying the groundwork in preparation for an operation in July 2008 to assert control of Basrah. The preparatory phase would include political, tribal and clerical engagement as well as economic/humanitarian initiatives. Rubaie claimed to have evidence that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had subsequently used Minister of State for National Security Shirwan al-Wa'eli to feed the PM fabricated reports that JAM was committing atrocities in Basrah - rapes, mutilation of women. This had spurred a "paranoid" PM to abandon the existing ISF plan in favor of a hastily conceived move against JAM. Al-Wa'eli handed the PM a list of 500 targets for arrest in Basrah, along with 450 arrest warrants. Rubaie claimed to

have "shot holes" in the reports and to have argued to no avail that Iraq's intelligence agencies should collaborate to crosscheck al-Wa'eli's intelligence.

4.(S) When the inadequately planned ISF operation stalled, the Iranians stepped in to broker a ceasefire - taking credit for ending the fighting that they had precipitated. (McGurk commented that this was a replay of Iran's past strategy to gain influence in Lebanon, through Damascus, which Rubaie found an apt parallel.) On a positive note, Rubaie judged that nationwide - with the exception of hardcore Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) areas like Sadr City, where the GOI's tools of persuasion are limited - the public was beginning to see the extent to which Iran stood behind the Special Groups and was using them to pursue an Iranian agenda. Rubaie said the public is savvy enough to know that the heavy arms that extremist militias flaunt on TV could only have originated in Iran.

5.(C) MALIKI TO FACE TOUGH QUESTIONS. Pol-Mil MinCouns and Senior Director McGurk emphasized the need for PM Maliki to ensure that the follow-up to the Basrah operation yielded a good outcome, and to portray it as a success to political leaders and the public. Rubaie said he had recommended to the PM that he publicize two or three success stories emerging from the Basrah confrontation. He expected Maliki to return to Baghdad from Basrah imminently, and had recommended he travel overland so that crowds of flag-waving, cheering children could be arranged en route.

6.(C) When the PM returned, he would face tough questioning from President Talabani, VP Hashimi, and VP Abdul Mahdi as to what the Basrah operation had achieved for the long term.

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Rubaie quoted the aphorism that "success has many fathers but failure is an orphan," adding that many who had supported the concept of sending the ISF to take control of Basrah were now backing away. As the Ambassador had said in earlier discussions (including a March 29 IESC meeting), opponents of Maliki could not be permitted to use the affair to bring down the government. This future of Iraq - not just of the Maliki government - depended on political unity, and it was up to the PM to mobilize political support across the spectrum.

7.(S) LEVERAGING CRACKS IN THE SADRIST TREND. Rubaie said the GOI had been working the past year to try to sever the links between Iranian-backed Special Groups and mainstream OMS/JAM. When Sadr had departed for Iran in 2007 to pursue his seminary studies, Rubaie continued, he had left OMS/JAM fragmented as local leaders jockeyed for power. No central authority issued from Najaf. Unfortunately, the Basrah fighting had brought JAM-affiliated elements together in opposition to the GOI/ISF to an unanticipated degree.

8.(S) Rubaie noted, however, that Point 6 of Sadr's statement of March 30 calling for JAM to stand down was a declaration that JAM possessed no heavy weapons. He interpreted this as a signal to the GOI and Coalition Forces (CF) that Sadr would not object to ISF/CF action against Special Groups fighters wielding heavy arms - which Rubaie saw as including not just indirect fire weapons, but also such arms as RPGs, heavy machine guns, and Explosively Formed Penetrators (EFPs). "Moqtada hates being ignored," Rubaie said, floating the idea of a GOI briefing to Sadr on the Strategic Framework/Status of Forces Agreement. Such an engagement might succeed in persuading Sadr that there were areas of shared U.S.-Iraqi interest (e.g. combating al-Qaeda). At a minimum, such an approach would educate Sadr and leave him with a less black and white view of the GOI's ties to the U.S.

9.(C) LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: RELIEF, JOBS, POLITICAL ACTION. Rubaie said that he had drawn on facts and figures provided by MNF-I to attempt to persuade a skeptical PM of the threat of a humanitarian crisis in Basrah. Pol-Mil MinCouns advised that, whether or not conditions in Basrah merited the term

"crisis," the GOI was in a position to use stockpiled supplies to improve the lot of Basrawis to levels higher than before the fighting. This would help the public, as well as boost the stock of the Maliki government. Rubaie agreed on the importance of job creation, saying that the most pressing need was not for technical training but for labor-intensive, low-tech jobs programs in poor areas.

10.(S) Warming to the theme of how to encourage disunity in the Sadrist trend, Rubaie asserted he knew of 100-plus Sadrist clerics who wanted independence from Moqtada. The GOI should embrace such leaders, including by sending them abroad for study tours and conferences to expose them to fresh ideas. OMS had Iraqi nationalist roots, and this could be tapped to counter Iran's (post-2004) inroads into the Sadrist movement. The GOI also needed to exploit tribal opposition to the militias by building on a nascent "Shia Awakening" in the south.

11.(C) RUBAIE BULLISH ON THE SAUDIS. Rubaie reiterated his satisfaction with his recent trip to Saudi Arabia, where he had found the Saudi government willing to provide a billion dollars in economic assistance and to discuss improved liaison, detainee releases, and intelligence sharing. Still, the Saudis remain convinced that Maliki is an inveterate sectarian, an image that Rubaie had been unable to shake. Conversely Rubaie confided that he worried the PM's aversion to the Saudis could derail opportunities for cooperation - one public comment by Maliki that Iraq didn't need to accept "alms from the Bedouin" and that would be the end of Saudi aid as well as of hopes for cooperation against Sunni extremist infiltration, funding, and agitation.

12.(C) STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK: NOW MORE THAN EVER. Rubaie and McGurk agreed that Iraq should move more quickly to assemble its senior negotiating team for the Strategic Framework; the ball was in Iraq's court. McGurk suggested that the Basrah operation had demonstrated Iraq's movement toward sovereign independence - which was consistent with the goals of the SF - but had also shown Coalition Forces still have a supporting role to play. The U.S. and Iraq need to continue to send a

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message to Iran but also to other actors, such as Sadr, that a Strategic Framework is not inimical to their interests. He cautioned that Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini had used the existence of an Iranian-U.S. SOFA as one more means of inflaming his supporters against the U.S. - a mode that Sadr might choose to emulate.

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